

Use of critical meta-theories to inform teaching and learning

A Case Study based on my
doctoral thesis

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My Background

- Qualified as a Town Planner
- Managed urban regeneration programmes in South Yorkshire in the 1990's



- Strategic support for sub-regional regeneration partnerships in the 2000's
- Doctorate in Business Administration, Sheffield Hallam University, 2001-2007
- Associate Lecturer, Sheffield Business School, 2008/9
- Senior Lecturer, Sheffield Business School, 2009/10

Developing interest in critical realism

- Interest in critical theory, going back to Geography degree, in late 1970's.
Introduced to critical realism at start of DBA course, in 2001
- Developed these ideas further in the DBA thesis (Breese, 2007)

EPISTEMOLOGY

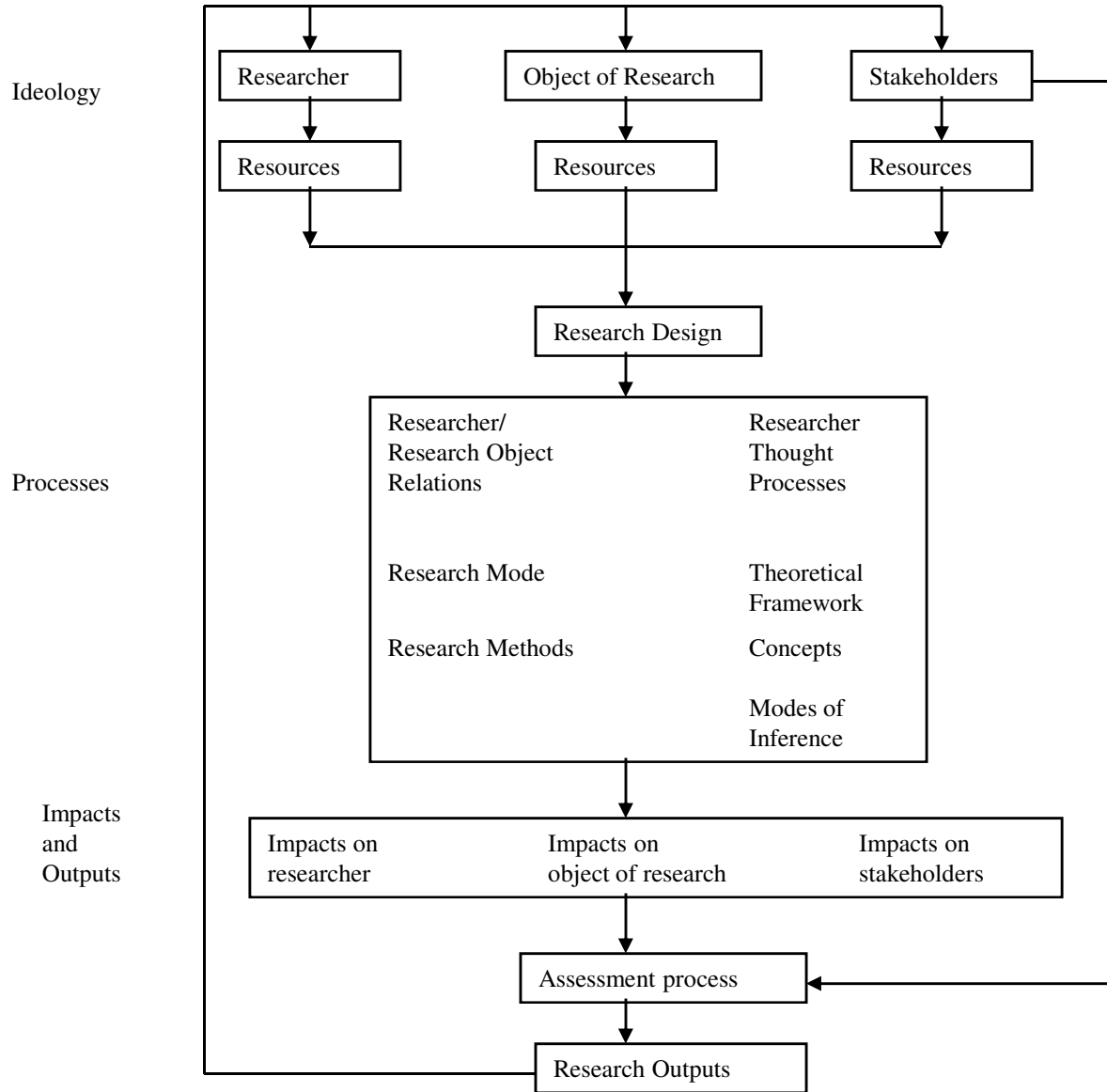
		<i>The act of observation is value free and accurately reflects reality (Objective)</i>	<i>The act of observation is influenced by concepts and values held by the observer (Subjective)</i>
<i>ONTOLOGY</i>	<i>Reality has meaning independent of the observer (Objective)</i>	Positivism Modernism Foundationalism Naïve objectivism Actualism Atomism Empiricism Empirical Realism	Critical realism Pragmatism Critical theory Fallibilism
	<i>Reality has meaning only through the act of observation (Subjective)</i>		Relativism Idealism Post Modernism Constructivism Interpretivism

Critical realism

So called because it combines scientific realism with critical naturalism

- Ontological realism – the world (natural and social) exists independent of our thinking about it, even though the social world is concept dependent
- Epistemological Relativism – (social) science is in the transitive realm. It is a historical project
- Judgemental Rationality – we can have good reasons for preferring one theory to another, but we need to recognise we might be wrong (fallibilist)

The research process in the social sciences: an Institutional, Realist Account



Subject matter for DBA Thesis

- Subject matter was the Operational Dimensions Framework (ODF), first developed to generate options for the restructuring of the ‘Special Programmes’ Team at Barnsley MBC in 2000
- Final title ‘Joining up public services: a critical realist framework for holistic governance’

Operational Dimensions Framework

Type of Dimension	Inputs	Processes	Outcomes for people	Outcomes for people	Outcomes for people	Contextual	Contextual
Dimension, and how it relates to service delivery	<p>1. Resources</p> <p>Combination of human and physical resources and funding</p>	<p>2. Functions</p> <p>Different activities undertaken within services</p>	<p>3a. Social Group</p> <p>Impacts on different groups in society</p>	<p>3b. Theme</p> <p>Impacts on different aspects of life. What kind of changes in people's lives is the service aiming to achieve?</p>	<p>3c Organisational Allegiances</p> <p>Stakeholders with an interest in the service Who are they? What are their interests in service delivery and outcomes?</p>	<p>4. Time</p> <p>Timescale over which service processes and outcomes are delivered</p>	<p>5. Space</p> <p>Geographical area over which service is delivered</p>

Practical uses of the ODF

- Operational Dimensions Framework can be related to the basic statement, that '**people undertake activities using resources, in time and across space**'.
- Method of working from the basic statement to produce a version of the ODF to help address any management problem
- Also a potential pedagogic tool, in terms of both understanding the world, and in structuring learning materials

Pedagogic uses of the Operational Dimensions Framework (1)

- Exploring the concept of sustainable development in a Level 6 module on Contemporary and Pervasive Issues. To assess whether an activity is sustainable or not, it is important to take account of the impacts across all dimensions
- *Practical use, no exposure of meta-theoretical underpinnings*

Pedagogic uses of the Operational Dimensions Framework (2)

- How learning materials are structured, in terms of the different dimensions, and whether they cover all the dimensions, eg modules on organisational change sometimes fail to explore the diversity of different types of organisation
- *Practical use, no exposure of meta-theoretical underpinnings*

Pedagogic uses of the Operational Dimensions Framework (3)

- In preparation for research at doctoral-level, to explore different ontological and epistemological positions, using the ODF to illustrate some of the key differences
- *Full exposure of meta-theoretical underpinnings*

Implications for teaching

- Implications of different ontological and epistemological positions for ‘Student knowing’ and ‘student becoming’ (Batchelor 2008)
- To what extent should ontological and epistemological positions be made explicit, and at what student level?
- Advocacy of particular ontological and epistemological positions or presentation of different options?
- Views of different stakeholders on these issues

Philosophies of Higher Education

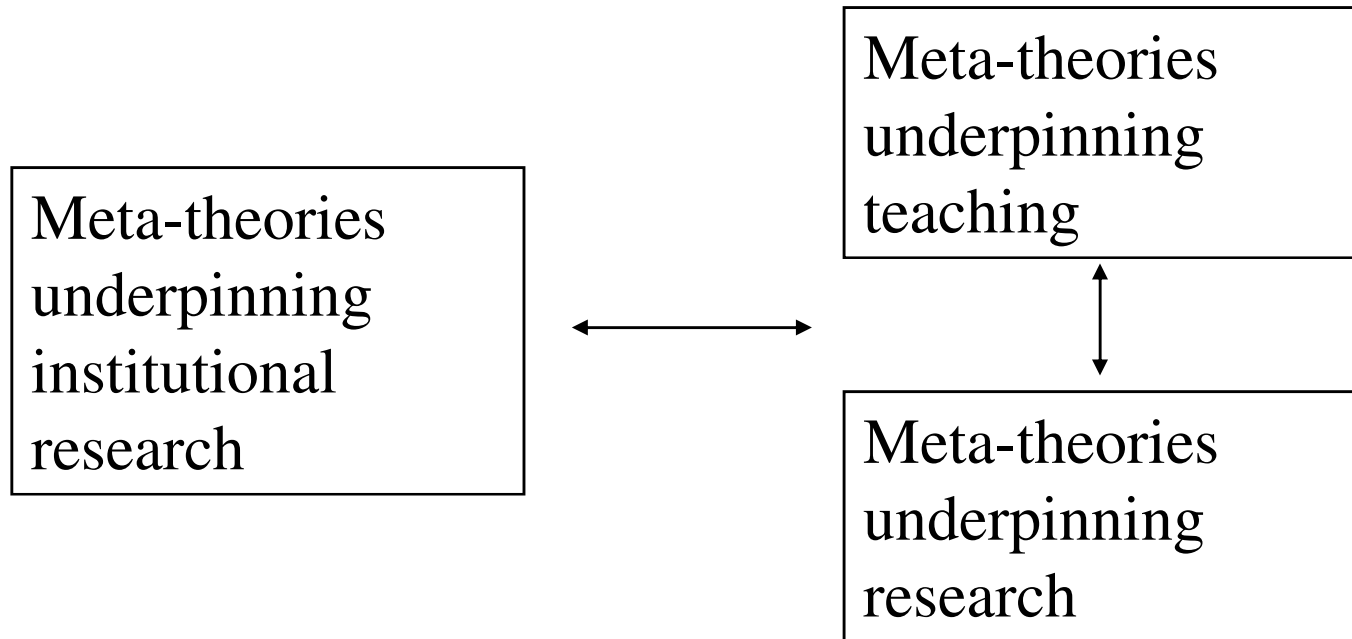
- Epistemological view - strive for objectivity, value-free knowledge, distinct line between academic and practical worlds
- Political view - develop expertise to understand and address the problems of society

(Brubacher, 1982, P12-14)

Teaching quality and approach to knowledge (Martin et al, 2002, P124)

- Study suggested that
 - teachers conceiving of the object of study as 'knowledge as given' intended to adopt teacher-focussed approaches
 - teachers conceiving of the object of study as 'knowledge as being constructed' intended to adopt more student-focussed approaches

Meta-theories and the research/teaching nexus



Implications for Institutional Research

- How should IR address the underpinning ontological/epistemological positions and the meta-theories utilised in
 - teaching
 - research
 - the positions of different stakeholders, eg students, businesses, the Government,
 - IR itself?

References

Batchelor, D. (2008), *Hinterland of voice*, Paper delivered at the IR Conference, 2008

Breese, R. (2007), *Joining up Public Services : a Critical Realist Approach to Holistic Governance*, DBA thesis, Sheffield Hallam University

Brubacher, J. S. (1982), *On the Philosophy of Higher Education* (revised edition), San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass

Martin, E., Prosser, M., Trigwell, K., Ramsden, P., Benjamin, J. (2002) 'What university teachers teach and how they teach it', 'in Hativa, N. and Goodyear, P., *Teacher thinking, beliefs and knowledge in Higher Education*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers